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NSC FOR H. MORROW

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SUBJECT: CONTRASTING VIEWS FROM OPPOSITION LEADERS IN
MEETINGS WITH CHARGE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Paul W. Jones for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Charge recently held separate meetings with key Opposition figures Senator Panfilo "Ping" Lacson and House Minority Leader Francis "Chiz" Escudero. Lacson and Escudero were a contrast in perspectives and style. Lacson predicted that new impeachment charges would be filed against President Arroyo at the earliest opportunity (mid-July). Lacson considered himself Arroyo's logical successor, having run against her in the 2004 elections. Escudero, a younger, more charismatic politician, was more relaxed regarding President Arroyo, indicating that there were areas where he would try to work with her. Overall, the meetings served to confirm the fragmented nature of the Opposition and its almost complete lack of a substantive agenda. End Summary.

A Hard-Edged Lacson

2. (C) Charge had lunch with Lacson on December 22. Lito Banayo, a long-time political associate of Lacson's, also attended, along with A/Pol/C. Throughout the meeting, Lacson was grim-faced about President Arroyo and the need to remove her from office. He said he considered her corrupt and ineffective in tackling the country's problems. When asked about Opposition plans in the coming year, Lacson made clear that he would support the filing of new impeachment charges in the House at the earliest possible opportunity in the new year. (Note: Per the Constitution, the earliest opportunity would be mid-July, one year after the filing of the last set of charges, which were dismissed by the House in September. End Note.) Lacson said a renewed impeachment effort would probably include a rehash of the old charges (which involved various abuse of power charges, including claims that President Arroyo cheated in the May 2004 elections). In addition, the Opposition would throw in any new charges that came up in the meantime. Banayo mentioned allegations that there had been large-scale misappropriation of the GRP's fertilizer fund, which he averred the Arroyo administration was trying to cover up. (Note: There have been claims that former Agriculture Undersecretary Jocelyn Bolante mismanaged the use of the roughly USD 14 million fertilizer program in order to provide funds for President Arroyo's re-election campaign and the campaigns of some of her supporters. Bolante has failed to appear despite being called by the Senate to testify on the matter on several occasions. End Note.)

3. (C) Lacson said he had little hope that large crowds of demonstrators would appear on the streets demanding President Arroyo's departure in the coming year. The Opposition had tried that tactic during the summer 2005 turbulence, but it had not worked. New revelations could change public perceptions, however. He also added that he did not think President Arroyo had any intention of leaving power early as part of the ongoing debate over Constitutional change. Indeed, he noted that a commission chosen by President Arroyo to look into the matter had recently recommended that she remain in power until her term ends in 2010. Lacson added that he did not support changing the Constitution to provide for a parliamentary system. The proposers of such changes had not proved to his satisfaction that their plans would truly reform the system and help solve the country's problems.

4. (C) Lacson indicated that he had no plans to work with the administration on any issue. He noted that he had once supported proposed anti-terrorism legislation, but was now convinced that the administration wanted to use such legislation against Opposition members. In any case, Lacson said the proposed bill faced significant opposition in the Senate, which could only be overcome by a devoted effort by the Arroyo camp. (Lacson noted that President Arroyo could win votes by providing "favors" for legislators.) Queried about his future, Lacson said that he no longer had any plans to run for mayor of Manila in 2007. He was now "sick" of politics and planned to get out when his term ended in 2007,

though he would continue to monitor the situation and might re-engage in the future. Lacson noted, however, that he considered himself Arroyo's logical successor if she ever stepped down, having run against her in the 2004 elections.

An Accommodating Escudero

15. (C) In his December 14 meeting with Charge, Congressman Escudero made clear that he was a long-standing opponent of President Arroyo's, but that he remained on speaking terms with her (unlike Lacson and many other Opposition leaders). He felt that he could work with the administration on various issues. For example, while he was critical of the proposed anti-terrorism bill, which he felt was in part targeted at members of the Opposition, he planned to continue to work with pro-President Arroyo representatives on the matter. He said he also would carefully consider Constitutional change proposals, though he doubted that the Senate would be receptive to the overall concept of getting rid of the body in order to create a unicameral system. Escudero did not mention a renewed impeachment effort against the President.

16. (C) When asked about the state of the Opposition, Escudero was negative, criticizing other leaders such as former senator Loren Legarda and her effort to throw out the results of the 2004 vice presidential election. (Note: Legarda was the losing vice presidential candidate in the race and claims that current VP Noli de Castro cheated to win. End Note.) Escudero said both sides cheated in the vice presidential election. Regarding his political future, Escudero confirmed that he planned to run in the 2007 elections for the Senate. (Note: Escudero has served in the House since 1998 and, after serving three terms, faces term limits in 2007. End Note.) As for further plans, Escudero commented that he plans to "to run until he loses," implying that he was even envisaging the presidency as a possibility down the line.

Comment

17. (C) The meetings served to confirm the fragmented nature of Opposition ranks. Lacson and Escudero, two major Opposition personalities, took dramatically different approaches toward President Arroyo, indicating there is little Opposition unity on how to deal with her. The meetings also highlighted the Opposition's almost complete lack of a substantive agenda. Lacson and Escudero's views were almost entirely tactical in nature: there was no apparent substantive plan of attack on President Arroyo on economic or other grounds. This is certainly good news for President Arroyo. Her standing remains low in the polls, but she can take some comfort from the lack of a coherent Opposition approach.

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